This essay from the English journal *Aufheben* provides a good overview of class warfare in Mexico, and more specifically into the class composition and struggles of the Indigenous people of Chiapas. Particularly interesting is the critical appraisal of the EZLN, their supporters, and their critics from the "ultra-left".

Kansas Mutual Aid Collective
PO Box 442438
Lawrence, KS 66044
kansasmutualaid@hotmail.com

Arm The Spirit

Solidarity ★

ISBN 1-894820-36-3

A Commune In Chiapas?

Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion

Solidarity ★

Solidarity is a small-scale Montreal-based publishing collective with a focus on revolutionary left-wing, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal politics and writings by prisoners. Working with *Arm The Spirit* we are publishing numerous pamphlets and books in hardcopy and on the internet to further the political development of the North American left. Many of these publications are histories of various important revolutionary groups, or writings by participants. We also fundraise for political prisoners thru sales of publications, for the Zapatistas with the sale of a benefit -shirt, distribute numerous videos, and maintain our website that includes a wealth of downloadable information. Subscribe to our electronic mailing list by filling out the form on our website.

Solidarity
2035 St. Laurent, 2e etage
Montreal, Quebec
H2X 2T3, Canada
email: solidarity@tao.ca
web: http://www.tao.ca/~solidarity

Arm The Spirit

Arm The Spirit is an autonomist/anti-imperialist information collective based in Toronto, Canada. Our focus includes a wide variety of material, including political prisoners, national liberation struggles, armed communist resistance, anti-fascism, the fight against patriarchy, and more. We regularly publish our writings, research, and translation materials on our listserv called ATS-L. We also publish pamphlets and books as part of a joint project with Solidarity, a Montreal-based group. For more information, contact:

Arm The Spirit
P.O. Box 6326, Stn. A
Toronto, Ontario
M5W 1P7 Canada
email: ats@etext.org
web: http://burn.ucsd.edu/~ats

A Commune In Chiapas?

Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion

Arm The Spirit ★ Solidarity

A Commune In Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion
Originally published in *Aufheben* magazine, United Kingdom
1st North American edition published February 2002
by Arm The Spirit / Solidarity in Montreal, Canada

ISBN 1-894820-36-3

Arm The Spirit
P.O. Box 6326, Stn. A
Toronto, ON
M5W 1P7
Canada
email: ats@etext.org
web: http://burn.ucsd.edu/~ats

Solidarity
2035 St. Laurent
2e etage
Montreal, QC
H2X 2T3
Canada
email: solidarity@tao.ca
web: http://www.tao.ca/~solidarity

distribution:

Kersplebedeb Distribution
CP 63560
CCCP Van Horne
Montreal, QC
H3W 3H8
Canada
email: info@kersplebedeb.com
web: http://www.kersplebedeb.com

Aufheben
Brighton & Hove Unemployed Workers Centre
4 Crestway Parade, Hollingdean
BRIGHTON BN1 7BL
United Kingdom

email: **aufheben99@yahoo.co.uk**
website: **http://lists.village.Virginia.EDU/~spoons/aut_html/auf1edit.htm**

Aufheben subscriptions

UK and Europe: £7 for three issues
Elsewhere: £10 for three issues
Cheques (sterling only) payable to *Aufheben*

Aufheben back issues

Issue 5 (autumn 1996): Class struggles in France, Winter 1995; autonomists and capital's strategy; reviews: 'new movements', James Carr.

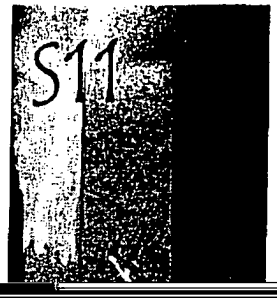
Issue 6 (autumn 1997): What was the USSR? Part 1 (Trotsky and state capitalism); Reflections on Class War; Whatever happened to the Situationists?

Issue 7 (autumn 1998): Retreat of social democracy, What was the USSR? Part 2 (Ticktin), Resurgence of class struggles in USA, Anti-fascism: Barrot replies.

Issue 8 (autumn 1999): Editorial; Humanarian war in Kosovo; Re-imposition of work in Britain and the 'social Europe'; What was the USSR? Part 3 (Left communism and the Russian Revolution)

Issue 9 (autumn 2000): Editorial; A commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista rebellion; What was the USSR? Part 4: Towards a theory of the deformation of value under state capitalism; Gilles Dauvé: Back to the

RECOMMENDED READING



S11
Truth and Consequences
Radical Perspectives on September 11

This pamphlet provides a good introduction to the history of US imperialism's collusion and conflicts with the Islamic far-right, including Osama Bin Laden's network, in Afghanistan. It also attempts to

A Commune in Chiapas?

On one level we can see it as a matter of a different theoretical approach. While the autonomists focus on the movement of struggle, thinking in terms of a generalisation of Zapatismo, the 'ultra left' look more to the content of Zapatista politics – their program – the limits of which they identify in the democratic and nationalist framework into which the Indigenous struggle has been projected. [2] *At the same time, while the autonomists wish to move with the mood of solidarity and inspiration the uprising has created, the 'ultra left' are disturbed by the way that identification with the EZLN is functioning, which has similarities to the role of anti-imperialist and Third Worldist ideology in the past. Support for existing struggle can become an ideological identification which represses criticism. However, criticism of struggle does not have to lead to an ideological turn against it.*

Our interest in the struggle in Mexico is how it expresses the universal movement towards the supersession of the capitalist mode of production. One needs to avoid acting as judge of every manifestation of this universal movement, dismissing those manifestations which don't measure up, while at the same time avoiding uncritical prostration before such expressions. The real movement must always be open, self-critical, prepared to identify limits to its present practice, and to overcome them. Here it is understood that communism 'is not an ideal to which reality must accommodate itself.' Our task is to understand, and to be consciously part of something which already truly exists – the real movement that seeks to abolish the existing conditions.

[23] Womack, op cit., p. 43.

[24] The EZ as a standing army is relatively small – combatientes are sent back home once their training and exercises are over, ready to be mobilised should the need arise. The full fighting strength of the EZ is probably around 17,000.

[25] Deneuve & Reeve, Behind the Balaclavas of South-East Mexico, discussed in more detail below.

[26] Because it takes the most provocative relentlessly unsympathetic stance, we will deal here largely with Behind the Balaclavas of South-East Mexico by Sylvie Deneuve and Charles Reeve, Ab Irato, Paris 1996 (available from BM Chronos, London WC1 N3XX, £1.50). Two other texts we have in mind are 'Mexico is Not Chiapas, Nor is the Revolt in Chiapas Only a Mexican Affair' by Katarina (TPTG) in Common Sense No. 22, winter 1997; and 'Unmasking the Zapatistas' in Wildcat No. 18, summer 1996. Though we use the terms 'ultra-left' the writers differ; TPTG are more situationist-influences, Deneuve and Reeve perhaps more council-communists, while Wildcat (UK – or should it be US – not Wildcat Germany) like to emphasize their 'hard' anti-democratic credentials. On the Zapatistas, Katerina's is by far the most positive of these three. However, TPTG's position towards the Zapatistas seems to have hardened, judging by their recent review of the book version of the Deneuve and Reeve piece.

[27] Antagonism, op.cit.

[28] Indeed, when the EZLN entered into peace talks in February 1994 they demanded not the restitution of Article 27, but the nationwide implementation of the Ayala Plan, much to the derision of the PRI.

[29] Marx cited in Camatte op. cit.

[30] The best account is the 'Report from the Second Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism' by Massimo de Angelis in Capital and Class No. 65, though don't bother with the dreadful academic waffle in the introduction.

[31] Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico, edited by John Holloway and Eloina Pelaez (Pluto Press, 1998) is the most thoroughgoing attempt to develop new ideas about the Chiapas uprising in English and whose arguments we deal chiefly with here. See also Towards the New Commons: Working Class Strategies and the Zapatistas by Monty Neill, with George Caffentzis and Johnny Machete (available at www.midnightnotes.org); and various articles in recent editions of Capital and Class. In Mexico, the Spanish language journal Chiapas is an ongoing academic project dedicated to exploring various aspects of the rebellion.

[32] 'Zapatismo: Recomposition of Labour, Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Project' by Luis Lorenzano in Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution (Op. cit.)

[33] Open letter to John Holloway, available at http://www.galmuri.co.kr/archive/archive1/wildcat3.htm. We would add that it seems that we are not dealing with a merely theoretical issue here, but one related to the position of the academic Marxist. They are tempted to use operaismo (Italian autonomists) ideas of the 'social factory', in which all areas of life become work for capital, to suppress the contradictions of their middle class role and redefine themselves as working class. But there is a problem here. There is a contradiction in their desire to validate themselves as intellectual workers while on the other hand wishing to claim status for the product of this work as a non-alienated contribution to the movement against capital. Indeed, perhaps the attraction of Marcos to many of the academic autonomist Marxists is that he, a fellow left intellectual, seems to be actually doing for the peasants of South-East Mexico, what they the academics claim to be able to do for the whole world working class, i.e. articulate and communicate the meaning of their struggle. The social division between mental and manual labour is the basis of class society; it must be overcome. The university is the supreme expression of this division; it is the artificial intelligence of the social factory. We are not saying that nothing useful comes from academic Marxists, but simply that their social position affects what they write.

[34] The combination of a pluralist program which defends diversity, traditional and quasi-mystical Mayan Indigenous and the image of masked-up guerrillas is the reason the UK direct action scene has found the Zapatista struggle so irresistible.

Introduction: The Mexican context

In past issues of *Aufheben* we have examined the retreat by the international bourgeoisie from the use of social democracy as a form of mediating class struggle, and asked whether it may reappear from future class struggle. So far we have focused our attention on Europe and North America. The retreat from social democracy is not confined to these areas, however. Class struggle in Mexico has been distorted for decades by a particularly durable strain of social democracy, personified by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI).

Social democracy is everywhere in retreat in Mexico. But the recent nine-month strike by students of the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) over tuition fees and the electricity workers' successful campaign against privatisation of the power grid are both indications of a new climate of resistance to the waves of economic rationalisation. Marching together in Mexico City demanding the release of political prisoners, they have formulated the beginnings of an alternative to so-called 'neoliberalism' [3] – an alternative, it must be said, that as yet appears unable to move beyond the crushing weight of social democracy that is the heritage of the Mexican working class.

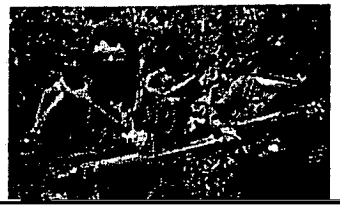
If anything in the recent history of class struggle in this gigantic country is able to look practically beyond social democracy, to the possibility of the constitution of human community over the reified community of capital, it is the struggle of the Zapatista Indigenous of Chiapas.

A brief chronology [4]

The Zapatistas first came to the attention of Mexico, and the world, when they occupied the Chiapan towns of San Cristobal de las Casas, Las Margaritas, Altamirano and Ocosingo on January 1st 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was due to begin operation. After destroying civil records and reading out their proclamation of revolt from the balcony of the Town Hall, the *Ejercito Zapatista de Nacional Liberacion* (EZLN) laid siege to the nearby military base of Rancho Nuevo, capturing weapons and releasing prisoners from the region's jails. The Mexican army responded savagely. The Zapatista army was dislodged relatively easily from the towns (although there was quite a fight in Ocosingo) and air force bombers followed the retreating Indigenous soldiers back into the highlands, Los Altos. January 10th saw a half-million strong demonstration for peace in Mexico City.

Within days the President, Carlos Salinas, unnerved by the sympathetic attention the Indigenous were receiving and the jitters of the stock market, which had lost 6.2% of its value since the uprising had begun, called a halt to the bombings and summary executions. February and March saw peace negotiations take place in San Cristobal, at which time the popular image of the rebel Indian dressed in black, wearing a ski-mask and toting a gun became an archetype. This period also saw the beginning of the Mexican media's love affair with Subcommandante Marcos, the apparent spokesman of the EZLN.

Despite visible headway, the differences between the ladino (European blood) politicians and the Indigenous peasants were irreconcilable. The PRI wished to limit the negotiations, and therefore the uprising itself, to the status of a 'local difficulty.' The Indigenous wanted to intervene politically on a much broader scale. Once the



[12] A good example of the way in which privatisation policies have undermined the PRI's social base is on the railways. Since the selling off of the rail network and subsequent redundancies and pay cuts, the PRI-controlled railworkers' union has lost more than 70% of its members. As a result the charros have found their funds slashed and their influence eroded.

[13] The 'Jungle' novels of B. Traven, particularly The Rebellion of the Hanged (Allison and Busby) are excellent for an historical understanding of Chiapas in this period.

[14] Rebellion from the Roots by John Ross, Common Courage Press, 1995, p. 70. This book

Footnotes

[1] Here we use this term as a convenient if problematic label for a political area, an area with which we have affinity. As we said in Aufheben 6 fnt. 2 p. 36 those who leftists dismiss as 'ultra-left' would argue it is simply that they are communist and their opponents are not. However as communism is not a particular interpretation of the world held by some people, but a real social movement we will not go down the path of attaching the approval-label 'communist' or 'revolutionary' to the small set of individuals and groups with whom one considers oneself in close enough theoretical agreement.

[2] For an interesting discussion of the differences between autonomist and (left-)communist or situationist approaches, see the Introductions to TechnoSkeptic and the Bordiga Archive at Antagonism, http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/3909/

[3] Opponents of 'neoliberalism' or 'globalisation' all too often identify capitalism with rampant

economics. Although an Accord on Indigenous Rights and Cultures was signed, which the Zapatistas still view as a great victory, the PRI has since refused to implement it anywhere. This Accord was intended to be the first of five, but it was by now clear that the PRI were using the peace talks to buy time in which to

eye, while simultaneously building solidarity networks as they reach out across Mexico. September 1997 saw 1,111 Zapatistas, one from each autonomous village, march from Chiapas to Mexico City, picking up supporters along the way. March 1999 saw *La Consulta*: 5000 male and female Zapatistas visited every municipality in Mexico in order to hold a ballot on Indigenous rights and the military build-up in Chiapas.

Despite the blockade, the Mexican army is unable to break the power of the autonomous municipalities. This is partly because the measures needed to achieve this would result in eastern Chiapas becoming a charnel house, and the PRI has been unwilling to court that sort of international attention. The army for their part are reluctant. The generals know their troops come largely from Mexico's urban slums and have no real quarrel with the Zapatistas. A prolonged and vicious attack could quickly bring insubordination and mutiny into the picture. Indeed, according to one officer who has since fled to the US, around a hundred Mexican soldiers deserted in the opening weeks of the Chiapas war. Instead, the army have taken to training paramilitaries, for which they afterwards claim no responsibility. The group *Mascara Rojo* (Red Mask) carried out the Acteal massacre of December 1997, the single worst atrocity yet in this struggle, in which 45 EZLN sympathisers, including women and children, were gunned down. Naturally the PRI then use such moments to justify sending yet more troops into the area – in order to 'control the paramilitaries'. Even so, the army has occasionally been let off the leash: April to June 1998 saw attacks on the autonomous municipalities of Flores Magon, Tierra y Libertad and San Juan de Libertad. As a result of these and other incursions, the number of refugees in Chiapas is now over 20,000.

1999 saw better prospects. In September hundreds of UNAM strikers travelled to Chiapas for meetings with the EZ. Desperate to stop the two sides meeting, the army and police pulled out all the stops on the dirt roads leading to the autonomous communities, though a few got through. The UNAM occupation in Mexico City was smashed by an enormous dawn raid in February 2000 and hundreds of students incarcerated on ludicrous terrorism charges. The UNAM strike, the largest student movement since 1968, could have all sorts of effects on Mexico's class struggle. No doubt some students will be recuperated by the state but further contestation seems inevitable for many. The independent electricity workers union has also sent delegations to eastern Chiapas. In their fight against privatisation of the electricity grid they have formed a National Forum which has been joined by over two hundred independent union sections and other social organisations. The *electristas* appear to have won their battle, though the threat has been lifted partly because privatisation remains unpopular and 2000 is an election year. Rationalisation in the electricity industry could easily be resurrected by the bourgeoisie in 2001 or 2002. The soil in which these struggles are rooted is still fertile. As the Zapatista supporters in San Cristobal say 'Nobody in Mexico knows what will happen next.'

The present article is an attempt to analyse the nature of the Zapatista uprising by moving beyond the bluster of the EZLN communiques, on which so many base their analysis of the EZLN. First however, we must examine the roots of the modern state – the Mexican Revolution.

has long called for, but that nothing will change, may now begin to shake the uncritical attitudes of the Zapatistas towards the concept of democracy. At the same time, after nearly seven years of military seige, the communities may wish to grab any olive branch that is offered them. But even in the unlikely event of an accommodation with the state, the Chiapan bourgeoisie will never forgive them.

The PAN victory has set the US bourgeoisie cock-a-hoop, naively believing that Mexico has voted for a unadulterated regime of 'neoliberalism'. For us, the Fox triumph raises several questions. How will the working class, no longer subjected to the ideological weight of The Revolution, react to the next wave of restructuring? Could campaigns such as that waged by the electristas grow in size and dynamism in the future without the hegemonic influence of the PRI? Before the election, the CTM had boasted of its intention to call a general strike should the PANista win – a boast which fell away hours after the result was declared. Already there are signs of a rapprochement with the new regime. Fox, for his part, will need the union bureaucrats if he is to forge ahead with the program of rationalisation. The flashpoint could well be the energy sector. The international finance markets demand this bastion of union power be privatised – but any move towards it will be hugely divisive. Fox will surely need to set up his own version of PRONASOL to offset the increasing class polarity in Mexican society, and he will need to do something fast about the debt millstone from the 1995 bank bailout.

For the Mexican proletariat, the battle lines are now much more clearly drawn.

women and children prepare to defend community against Army

Postscript: September 2000: Mexico and the Fall of the PRI

After seventy-one years the PRI has lost the Presidency and with it national power in Mexico. Despite getting up to all their old tricks in the run-up to the July 2nd poll – the Michoacan governor was caught plotting to divert state funds into election bribes, and in the state of Quintana Roo the PRI were even giving away free washing-machines – and despite the fact that the much heralded independent Federal Electoral Institute was controlled by the party-state, Vicente Fox, the leader of the PAN received 43% of the vote. The shock came in the PRI conceding defeat so swiftly. This time around, they lacked the political stomach for arranging the vast fraud needed to switch defeat to victory.

Why did the PRI lose? The simple answer is corruption. After so many years of institutionalised venality the electorate finally found a sturdy enough opposition bandwagon upon which to jump. On a broader level, it is now apparent just how far the PRI's traditional networks of power were undermined by the economic restructuring – and particularly the privatisations – of the 1980s and 90s. Their irony is that, having propelled Mexico out of its old economic protectionism, they themselves have not survived the transition. Just as the Porfiriato was compelled eventually to assault its own social base in the years before the Revolution, so the PRI through its economic reforms has attacked its social base – the peasants and the working class. What future now for the PRI? With command over such large resources they are far from finished. But the splits were evident from the very first morning of defeat. There could now be an official divorce between the dinosaur wing and the technocrats. The dinosaurs, desperate to recapture their traditional constituency may veer headlong back into old-fashioned social democracy – an unpalatable alliance with the PRD could be on the cards. Meanwhile the technocrats, who side naturally with the PAN, will wish to see their party reinvented along Western lines. A split with the social democrats would be in their interests, so long as the left-wing do not take too much of the organisation with them. Alternatively, a clear split could fail to emerge and the whole party could collapse in on itself. Whatever happens, it will be messy and protracted.

In Chiapas, the PRI have also lost their hold on the governorship, and there is a new PRD governor. Will the new PANista President, or the PRDista governor pull the troops out? It seems unlikely, though there may be a minor peace initiative. The fact that there has been the democratic change the EZLN

Part 1: The Roots of the Modern State

The Revolution is the touchstone of Mexican politics. The period saw the Mexican state begin its transformation from an oligarchical-landowners' government to the one-party corporatist model which survived for so long. The Revolution is also crucial to understanding the peculiar social base from which the Mexican state is constructed, with its formal recuperation of worker and peasant organisations, and its need to regularly embark upon sprees of revolutionary rhetoric. The revolution was driven forward by the peasants' attack on the latifundias, or large estates, the dominant mode of accumulation in Mexico at the time. Despite subsequent industrialization, the latifundias have persisted – even grown – and have remained a locus of class struggle ever since, most recently in Chiapas. To grasp the importance of land struggles in Mexico we need to understand how the latifundias operate, and how they plug into the cycles of national accumulation. [6]

The Latifundias

The Porfiriato, the administration of Porfirio Diaz, ruled Mexico from 1876 to 1910. Its social base was the latifundistas, the large landowners, and it was their class interests that were transmitted through the government. The rapid industrialisation that Mexico was undergoing at the turn of the twentieth century was confined to tiny areas of the country, and the industrial bourgeoisie as a class were too weak to make much political headway in the Porfiriato. The large estates originated from the fallout of the Reform War, which had ended in 1867. The victorious Liberal wing of the oligarchy intended to create a limited system of small landholdings that would be constructed mainly from confiscated Church property and the expropriated communal land of Indigenous. But almost as soon as these smallholdings came into existence they were aggressively acquired by a new breed of landowner (the *latifundista*), the smallholder generally being unable to exist solely on his land. These smallholders became either poorly-paid day-labourers (i.e. seasonally employed) or debt-peons, little more than slaves. In the southern and central areas of Mexico, the latifundistas further expanded their property by violently evicting peasants (campesinos) from their *ejidos* (communal production units). This process produced continual class conflict in the countryside. The expansion of the latifundia property-form penetrated the countryside only to the extent that the local populace could be suppressed. Faced with widespread resistance, the landowners organised the *Guardias Blancas* (White Guards, usually campesinos-turned-bandit, in turn recruited back to the Side of Order). The fact that these brutal paramilitary groups have been a constant part of rural life ever since indicates that the peasants have never admitted defeat in the land war, and the landowners know it.

The latifundias, which were usually centred on a lavish, European-style hacienda, were the wellspring of surplus extraction in the economy. Sugar, coffee, cotton, India rubber: exported abroad, as well as serving the needs of the internal market, these were the sources of wealth for the landowning classes. And if the international trade cycle contracted, the latifundia could easily withdraw into limited, or even subsistence, production. The cost of the reproduction of labour fell always on the villages outside the property and

never on the hacienda. While the elasticity of this form of accumulation accounts for its longevity, it was in many ways backward. The commodification of labour-power and money relations had spread to an extent throughout the agricultural sector, but were by no means universal. On many haciendas the landowners paid their workers in produce, or forced them to purchase from or

Conclusion

The EZLN has at its heart the confrontation between Indian traditions of rebellion and self-organisation, the influence of the militant Church, and the Guevarist-inspired model of guerilla war against the state. This model, in its most

For the worldwide proletariat, though, racism is not a defining characteristic, though it is an important one for millions. The defining condition is rather that of having nothing to sell but one's labour-power. Dignity as the Zapatistas mean it is impossible to translate to all parts of the world, though those sections of the world working class who experience virulent racism may get a lot out of it. If dignity was translated universally, with radical content by a rebellious proletariat, it could be all too easily recuperable by capital. Acquistion of new commodities and rights could be turned into a counterfeit dignity not only negating the impulse to revolt, but turning it to capital's advantage – a similar process to that which has happened in many impoverished black areas in the US.

To be fair to Holloway, he does acknowledge that 'the uprising would be strengthened if it were made explicit that exploitation is systematic to the systematic negation of dignity.' But nothing is made explicit in that part of the Zapatista program which deals with life beyond the autonomous municipalities. Those academics who intently study the language of the uprising do so only because there is so little consistent content. The amorphous 'program for Mexico' is either reformist or naively open to reformist manipulation. The real process is the reorganisation of the Indians lives and communities. It is Zapatismo's revolutionary practice within Chiapas that is the real inspiration for the rebel against capitalism.

The End of the Morelos Commune

If the Zapatistas had, at least in the short term, resolved the contradiction of their class position by favouring the communal over the incipient bourgeois, in shared land rather than private property, they were unable to resolve a further contradiction, and one which led ultimately to the smashing of their stronghold, the Morelos Commune, by the reconstituted power of the state. While the revolutionary campesino was (almost literally) everywhere, they were unable as a class to move beyond their localist perspective. The Ayala Plan was the most sophisticated attempt to intervene on a national level – yet it talked about the land and nothing else. Unlike the revolutionary proletariat, separated forever from the means of production, they did not see the need to transcend their class, and with it all classes. The revolutionary working class needs to talk about everything in its attempts to generalise its struggles; the peasantry believes it needs only to talk about the land. The campesinos of this period had struggled around their needs, had largely succeeded, and now found themselves unable to develop further.

The revolutionary peasants who in December 1914 occupied Mexico City were undoubtedly one of the highest expressions of class struggle in the world at that time. The workers of Europe were drowning in their own blood and the Russian Revolution was still three years away. By contrast, the whole of Mexico was at the peasants' feet. The national power of the bourgeoisie was smashed and its survivors had retreated to the eastern port of Veracruz. Yet it was at precisely this moment that the traditional peasant deference, which is rooted in the contradictory nature of peasant existence and the cultural baggage that accompanies it, asserted itself. Refusing a political solution from within themselves, and trusting that military strength alone would prevail, they inadvertently left the door open to a weak but reconstituting state power. This inability to find a wider social perspective is at least something the present day Zapatistas, with all their limitations, have been

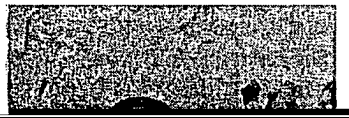
obliged to overcome, while many of their campesino brothers and sisters in the west of Chiapas are still unable to make the jump from atomised deference to communal organisation.

The preamble to the Ayala Plan had ruled out any compromises with the bourgeois leader Madero and other 'dictatorial associates.' Yet the Zapatistas were chronically unable to see beyond their own backyard. This blindness to the threat of the state was the highest contradiction of the exemplary peasant movement of the Mexican Revolution.

The working class

Individually, many miners, railwaymen and textile workers joined the peasant Northern Division, which had entered into a de facto alliance with the Zapatista Southern Liberation Army. As a class, however, and despite a huge strike wave in 1906, they remained quiet until 1915.

The peasant armies which had occupied Mexico City had failed to inspire working class support, or indeed relate to them in any way. As a result, in exchange for union concessions from the revolutionary bourgeoisie, the reformist federation of unions, the *Casa del Obrera Mundial* (COM) agreed to form 'Red Battalions' to fight the Northern Division and the Zapatisatas. Although this decision did not go unopposed, the electricians' union refused to abide by the pact – the Red Battalions fought alongside what were known as the Constitutionalist armies throughout 1915. Yet only a year later the working class was paying the price for this complicity. The new bourgeoisie, having beaten off the threat from the peasants, no longer needed the unions. COM headquarters was stormed by troops and unionists across the country arrested. The following year, 1916, the first general strike in Mexican history was crushed.



Dignity

Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico concludes with Holloway's treatment of the Zapatista concept of dignity. Marxism, he argues, has developed a number of terms to describe capital's domination over the producers of wealth, but has not developed a corresponding language to describe the dialectical movement of working class liberation, with the exception of 'self-valorisation' (itself a not unproblematic reversal of a central capitalist category). This lack of a positive pole around which to organise has hampered the development of a conscious movement against the capitalist mode of production. But with their concept of 'dignity' the Zapatistas may have filled a gap in the market. By generalising it, Holloway believes 'dignity' could become a workable idea around which to organise against the daily indignities of life under capital.

The problem he tries hard to avoid is the abstract nature of 'dignity' once it is universalised. By attempting to generalise it, he is rupturing it from the place where it makes sense – rural Chiapas, where it acquires such a powerful resonance. There is no doubt that for the Indigenous dignidad is a crucial concept – one that has been generated both naturally and consciously from their struggles against the landowners and ranchers. It has been endowed with a radical content that has led the campesinos into becoming Zapatistas, into constructing their autonomous municipalities, in whose self-activity the negation of capital resides. But dignity is only so powerful because of the conditions against which it has rebelled – many of which do not apply to vast swathes of the world's working class.

We would argue that it is impossible to understand the concept of dignity in Chiapas without understanding the racism the Indigenous have been subjected to for decades. As we have already noted, the Zapatista movement is to all intents and purposes completely Indigenous. Non-Indian *campesinos*

A Commune In Chiapas?

The point is not that, amongst these [redacted]

The 1917 Constitution

[redacted]

This radicalised form of social democracy came through the conduit of Lazaro Cardenas, President from 1934-40. His first and most important task was to sign a pact with the new CGOCM (Confederation of Workers and Peasants). By 1935 half of all Mexico's organised workers were in CGOCM and strikes were going through the roof. Cardenas immediately recognised the right to strike, poured money into CGOCM patronage and shifted the sympathy of the state's labour relations boards away from the employer and towards the working class as represented by the unions. In 1936 CGOCM was renamed the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) and recognised as the official national labour movement. The highpoint of the radical social democratic project came in 1938, with Cardenas's nationalisation of the largely US-owned oil industry. Cardenas manipulated the enthusiasm for this measure to generate a spirit of 'national unity', which he then used to crush the insurgent workers' movement.

It was not only the cities the radical party-state had to attend to in order to prevent social revolution breaking out. The countryside had ignited and sustained the Revolution, and could do so again. Cardenas's solution was a massive redistribution of land the like of which social democracy in Mexico has not been compelled to repeat. Naturally only the worst land was parcelled out – the property and interests of the hacendados left intact. While the Cardenas reforms appeared impressive, they not only preserved social relations in the rural areas, they bolstered and expanded commodity relations by creating a new class of small landowners. For the vast majority a small patch was unsustainable and seasonal wage-labour unavoidable. The ultimate result of the land reforms was marginalisation for the many, a new network of small competitive farming for some, and the consolidation of the lumbering latifundias.

In fact Cardenas had mobilised the working class in part to discipline those recalcitrant sections of the bourgeoisie who needed to be saved from themselves. After 1940 the bourgeoisie as a whole accepted the necessity of state intervention. Even more crucially, any revolutionary movement from below could be mediated through the now-reliable CTM or the new CNC (National Campesino Confederation). As part of the party-state, these organisations could deliver certain concessions, defuse proletarian and peasant anger through nationalist channels and turn a blind eye to repression if it was needed. The state had solved the crisis it had been mired in since the fall of the Porfiriato, and it has followed the same model until very recently: one party guaranteeing social democracy (peace between the officially-recognised antagonistic classes). Unlike the west, it has not needed the shield of formal bourgeois democracy to do so.

The Economy After 1940

The American Fordist model of accumulation, whereby increased productivity pays for higher wages, which in turn boosts demand, could not be followed in Mexico. The native bourgeoisie was too weak to innovate and had always relied on America for heavy industrial investment. The agricultural sector still lagged far behind that of America. While US capital may not consciously have wanted to keep Mexico underdeveloped, it saw it generally as fit only for natural resource and labour-power exploitation.

The refusal to take power and civil society

In rejecting the classical model of guerilla war since the uprising, and through measures such as the ban on members of the EZLN holding public posts, the 'refusal to take power', either through Leninist or reformist means, has been identified as a major contribution to post-cold war revolutionary practice. The academics see it as a final rejection of the state, of an end to the conquering of political power in order to impose one view of the world over all others. But the academics have ignored one thing: the Zapatistas have taken power – in the areas where they have been able to. They have forced landlords to flee – and killed some – torn down their houses, expelled caciques and PRIistas. In the autonomous municipalities, the power of the PRI is smashed, replaced by campesino self-activity, protected by campesino guns. If that is not taking power (or 'reabsorbing state power'), then what is?

It is true however that the EZLN of today does not wish to storm the Presidential Palace in Mexico City (which, given its size, is an impossibility). They do not seek to impose their views on other struggles, as is clear from their refusal to dominate *Encuentros* or the FZLN. But clearly they have a vision of change beyond their corner of Chiapas. How, then, will this change come about?

The EZLNs answer is through 'civil society', the multitude of small, often middle class and single-issue groups who exist in opposition to, and outside the budget of, the PRI. John Ross in *Rebellion from the Roots* characterises civil society as 'that unstated coalition of opposition rank-and-file, urban slum-dwellers, independent campesino organisations and disaffected union sections, ultra-left students, liberal intellectuals, peaceniks, beatniks, rockeros, punks, streetgangs and even a few turncoat PRIistas, all of whose red lights go on at once whenever there is serious mischief afoot in the land.' We would also add human rights and environmental groups to the mix.

Things deteriorate further when John Holloway denies the possibility of identifying the class position of any social group or individual anywhere – class becomes a concept without a definition! His position is that the antagonism between human creativity and alienated work which runs through every individual cannot ultimately be extended into identifiable class formations which struggle with each other: 'Since classes are constituted through the antagonism between work and its alienation, and since this antagonism is constantly changing, it follows that classes cannot be defined.'

Naturally we agree with Holloway on this existence of the internal conflict between human creative activity and alienated exploitation, just as we agree that the reified categories of capital, such as wage-labour, which are constituted from class struggle, are open to constant contestation. On one level, capital is reproduced from our own activity every hour of every day. But at the same time we necessarily confront these reified categories as objective reality. As Wildcat (Germany) say, in a good critique of Holloway's reasoning "in attempting to oppose the objectivist, definitional and classificatory concept of class, [Holloway has thrown] the baby out with the bathwater. If we reduce the concept of class to a general human contradiction present in every person between alienation and non-alienation, between creativity and its subordination to the markets, between humanity and the negation of humanity, then the class concept loses all meaning." [33]

Classes do constitute themselves, and the class struggle is fought, not only internally, but in real concrete situations between identifiable social groups in streets, offices, factories, the countryside, all the time. Unfortunately the academics have spent little time examining these very real characteristics (that would for them be mere 'sociology'), and their arguments have a somewhat fantastic feel.

As we have already argued, we do not accept the global centrality of the struggle in Chiapas, although we do not deny the importance of certain industries in that region to international capital. We see the Zapatistas rather as an inspirational moment of class struggle on the peripheries. In fact it is their geographical remoteness which, through the relative impossibility of developing an atomised individuality, has bolstered the communal aspect, and so the revolutionary practice of the campesinos. However, while we do not agree with the central thesis of the academics, it is still worth taking a quick look at their treatment of the most important EZLN ideas.

A Commune In Chiapas?

Mexico did, though, industrialise rapidly after 1940. The model was state-led capitalism with its own Mexican peculiarities. Investment in infrastructure was the province of the state. Petroleum, rail and communications sectors were all under state control, and the state generally carried out economic development which the private sector thought too risky. The resources of the state were augmented by huge foreign investment. Mexico has always been a natural first stop for America's foreign-bound surplus value; now it flooded over the border as a result of the post-war boom.

By the 1960s, Mexico had been enjoying its economic 'miracle' for some time. GDP had risen on average 6-7% annually. Profit flowed into state coffers, paying for an unofficial welfare state of sorts. However social inequality was reaching new extremes. By 1969 the proportion of national income going to the poorest half of the population was only 15%. In rural areas, as agricultural mechanisation increased and productive land was concentrated, the number of un- or underemployed was going up. Some, seeking to refuse proletarianisation, moved away from the agricultural heartlands and attempted to chip out a living from barely cultivatable land – this being the option many Chiapan Indigenous took; many moved to the cities to join the reserve army and effectively kept factory and workshop wages down; some became migrant workers following the harvests through Morelos, Oaxaca, San Luis Potosi and Veracruz. Still others crossed the border into the US. [8]

In the towns and cities even the organised industrial proletariat suffered from low wages. While they were relatively well off compared to those in small workshops or the unemployed, struggling to survive in any way that they could, their wages were a fraction of their US counterparts'. Their union organisation militated for higher wages, yet this was offset by the absolute corruption of the charros (union bureaucrats), who would often swipe their members' dues. More than anything being in a strong union meant a guarantee of a job, a buttress against unemployment.

However, for the 'pillars of society', those sections of the population incorporated into the party-state, the costs of the reproduction of labour were paid, after a fashion – by the 'PRI welfare state'. It is difficult to quantify, but the far-reaching web of the PRI guaranteed an existence for those sections of society it needed to perpetuate itself. Whether it be official (wage rises) or unofficial (backhanders, protection or the elimination of a rival), it all had to be paid for. The corruption of the PRI welfare state has certainly retarded the efficiency of Mexican industry, prompting many members of the bourgeoisie to defect to the PAN (National Action Party), the pro-business Catholic party set up in the 1930s to oppose the Cardenist reforms.

Mexico's '68

By the late 60s the inability of the PRI to reform and democratise itself was apparent to many sections of

and developing a unity-through-difference. Indeed it could be said in some ways that the Encuentros mirror the cross-class nature of civil society, which we deal with below.[30] But the

So it must mean something else. The issue is hardly clarified by the EZ's communiques, which are as confusing as ever. There we can find statements that speak both of 'the importance of the patria (homeland)' and of 'a world without frontiers or borders.' As Wildcat say in 'Unmasking the Zapatistas', this is called having your cake and eating it.

The answer lies surely in a closer examination of the material conditions of this struggle. The Zapatistas are, as we noted earlier, to all intents and purposes one hundred per cent Indigenous. Tzeltals, Tzotzils, Chols, Mams, Zoques and Tojolabals are the composition of the uprising. Many of the men do not speak Spanish and almost none of the women do. The Mexican state has neglected or murdered them for decades. Yet they are communicating with Mexico, people with whom they do not share a common ancestry.

We need to bear in mind two things. The first is the experience of the Mexican Revolution. If there is one qualitative and positive difference between the Zapatistas of then and the Zapatistas of now, it is that the latter, with their limited experience of wage-labour and the influence of the FLN, have managed to break away from the myopic localism of peasant struggle. Their desire to intervene in national life is preferable to a refusal to look beyond the boundaries of their own home province or state.

Secondly, the 'ultra-left' articles we are examining were all written before the EZLN developed their project of the *Encuentro*, the international meetings 'for humanity and against neoliberalism.' Essentially we believe the Zapatistas have transcended their localism and have developed important tendencies towards internationalism, though in an important sense, and one which is part of the leftist aspect of their heritage, they are still retarded by a nationalist perspective. There have been three *Encuentros* so far, in Chiapas, Spain and Brazil, forums where activists and those engaged in struggle gather from around the world to discuss what is on their minds. By all accounts these meetings have been confused and confusing: the focus is on networking and heterogeneity rather than organising

from 1973, began a series of strikes, go-slows and demonstrations. Just like 1959, their demands were over wages and the removal of corrupt union leaders: a struggle for autonomy that raised the possibility of going beyond the trade union form as such. The movement organised new unions outside the CTM and formed currents of resistance within it.[10] The fact that the workers had often to physically fight the charros and their goons, who sometimes used the tools of disappearance and assassination, meant that the CTM could easily and visibly be identified as the enemy. While few workers seem to have used this as an opportunity from which to develop a critique of wage-labour, there can be no doubt that the mid '70s strike movement increased both the self-confidence of the Mexican working class, and the sense of their being an antagonistic class, the opposition to, and negation of, the bourgeoisie.

The movement reached its height in 1976. The radical electricians' union, who had brought together new unions, urban squatter groups, and peasant organisations to form the 'National Front of Labour, Peasant and Popular Insurgency', now called a national strike. The administration responded by sending the army to occupy every electrical installation in Mexico. This was only the most visible of the many acts of repression which pushed the new labour militancy into defeat.

The state also responded with massive social spending. Foreign investment, however, was flooding out of Mexico. Moreover, state expenditure on unproductive industries staffed by rebellious workers was never going to solve the crisis of accumulation. Then an unexpected and propitious discovery gave the bourgeoisie room to manoeuvre – oil.

Oil boom – and bust

As a result of the oil boom, the economy was growing at around 8% by the end of the 1970s. Not only had the discovery of new petroleum deposits pulled Mexico out of the recession that had begun in 1973, the growth and concomitant wage rises had served to head off the snowballing class struggle.

The oil still in the ground off the Yucatan peninsula and in Chiapas was used as collateral for huge loans from abroad. Western banks, stuffed with surplus petrodollars as a result of the OPEC oil price hike eagerly lent out these vast sums to Mexico and many other 'Third World' nations. The loans were used to cover both the trade and the budget deficits.

The bourgeoisie assumed the price of oil would continue to rise, as it had done since 1973: the extent of their loans was predicated on future oil revenue. However, the price of oil dropped sharply after 1979. Coupled with rising interest

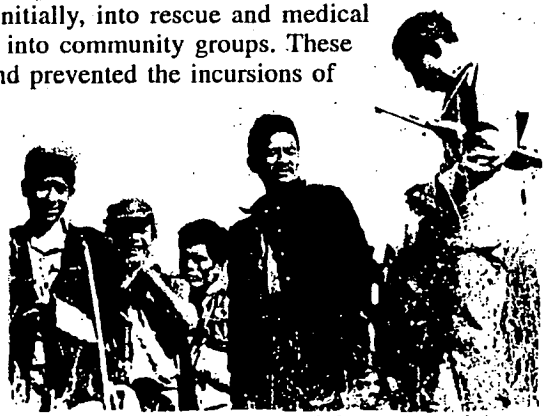
The Lost Decade

1982-1992 is sometimes called the Lost Decade in Mexico. The story is a familiar one: having to go to the IMF for money to keep the economy afloat, the PRI found themselves obliged to roll the state back from the arena of capital. This meant bringing the budget deficit under control, removing state subsidies to industry and agriculture, and lowering wages in order to stem the runaway inflation which had been fuelled by the oil mirage. State enterprises were privatised by the fistful, usually offloaded at below market value to PRI cronies. And 1986 saw Mexico finally joining GATT after years of protectionism: many companies went bankrupt as a result.

In December 1987 the Economic Solidarity Pact was signed by representatives of government, the unions and business. (Many of these union leaders had come to prominence through the struggles of the 1970s). Restraint in wage demands and price controls on consumer goods was agreed. The Pact was nothing less than an attempt to preserve the social fabric so that restructuring could go ahead unfettered. But its very existence raised the possibility of its being wrecked by a new proletarian offensive.

Unfortunately the terrain of struggle had changed. While the struggle for autonomy in the 1970s had ended at the time of the oil boom, capital was now in a much less expansive position. If the crisis of accumulation was to be solved restructuring was essential. The offensive anti-charro struggles of the working class now became purely defensive and economic. As plants were closed or privatised, workers made redundant or had their wages lowered, the struggle oriented itself around sectional bread-and-butter issues, which engendered fragmentation. Better-paid CTM workers were still relatively protected, and the 1970s generation of charros were consequently in a much more credible position to mediate struggle. And if the situation became desperate, there was always the allure of the US border for the desperate proletarian.

Two moments from the 1980s indicate, however, that overt class antagonism had not vanished from the Mexican landscape. The first is to be found in the weeks following the devastation caused by the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. With the government paralysed, the residents of Mexico City's barrios formed themselves, initially, into rescue and medical teams, and shortly thereafter into community groups. These groups both rebuilt houses and prevented the incursions of landlords, many of whom wished to use the earthquake as an excuse to evict their tenants and rebuild the neighbourhoods with middle class housing at middle class prices. From these autonomous working class formations came a network of self-help groups, groups that make up part of what the Zapatistas call 'civil society'. [11]



Genaro Vasquez (center) & guerrillas of the National Civic Revolutionary Association (NCRA) in Guerrero in 1970s

There are two ways in which we can make sense of the productive forces argument. The first is that, through the army, the EZ itself has revolutionised social relations in the villages. Breaking down the gender barrier, releasing the energy and confidence of the young; its need for centralised organisation compels previously isolated villages to communicate and work together. Through its need to impose itself on the outside world it is certainly a modernising influence. But the EZ is not connected to land production. The villages and municipalities are left to do what they will with the occupied lands: the EZ has not encouraged new crops for market, new seed varieties or irrigation projects. The *ejidos* and reclaimed lands are still very much dedicated to subsistence farming.

But despite their inability to produce a meaningful surplus, and coming as they do from the 'different world' of the peasantry, perhaps the Zapatistas are still a proto-embryonic landowning class through their tolerance, in the Revolutionary Agrarian Law, of smallholdings? This Law allows private holdings of up to a hundred hectares of poor quality land, or fifty of good quality land, which is a fair bit of space. It is almost identical to the Ayala Plan which was discussed at the beginning of this article, and many of those same arguments apply. [28] We would of course like to see the elimination of all small property relations. But if we are looking for the seeds of the new world in the old, we must look for the tendencies towards communism. Marx commented on the agrarian commune: "Its innate dualism allows an alternative: either its property element will prevail over the collective one, or the latter over the former. It all depends on the historical environment." [29] In the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas private holdings are rare, the collective prevails.

Nationalism

The ultra-leftists' strongest charge against the Zapatistas is that they are nationalists: the Zapatista project is nothing more than a retreat from the rigours of the global market into the old certainties of national social democracy, this time around redeemed by the absence of the PRI. To facilitate this, the 'ultra-leftists' imply, they are seeking alliances with sections of the national political class, manoeuvring themselves into ever more advantageous positions from which to take power.

This is simply not true. The Zapatistas have never entered into any formal alliance with any fraction of Mexico's political class. They flirted briefly with the PRD back in 1994, and, as far as we know, they have not repeated the exercise as a result of their experience. Indeed, one of the EZs revolutionary laws forbids its members from holding any sort of public post. Of course laws can be changed. But if the Zapatistas' aim is to ally themselves with nationalist sections of the bourgeoisie they are being uncharacteristically incompetent about it.

It would, however, be foolish to deny the patriotic elements of the Zapatista struggle. The national anthem is sung in the communities, though not as often as the Zapatista anthem, and the flag is occasionally paraded about, all of which makes any self-respecting revolutionary cringe with embarrassment. The flag is a clue to the quixotic nature of the Zapatista's 'nationalism.' The red, white and green of the Mexican flag are also the colours of the PRI, who have had until recently the exclusive rights to use it politically. Yet the rebel Indians are hardly displaying the flag as a sign of support for the regime that is pointing guns at them.

The other side of this mediation of the uprising is a genuine need to communicate with

A Commune In Chiapas?

A more dissipated, but nevertheless important response to the austerity program was the Presidential election of 1988.

Meanwhile, with interest rates soaring at 120%, many businesses and mortgage-owners were unable to keep up their repayments, despite a new government subsidy for the middle class. Seven banks collapsed and needed rescuing by the government. The true cost of this bailout only became apparent in 1999 – $93bn, nearly 20% of GDP! This debt, which is accruing 18% yearly interest, and which the PRI has hidden from public accounts, falls due in 2003. Unless it is restructured soon, the Mexican capitalist class may find themselves in trouble yet again.

The response of the working class to this austerity package was determined

Behind the Balaclavas does, however, point to an important problem which supporters of the Zapatistas are unable to perceive: the way in which the EZLN commanders, and Marcos in particular, are mediators, specialised leaders and negotiators apart from the mass of the rebel Indigenous. The question then is: to what extent have these roles

Sylvie Deneuve and Charles Reeve's article *Behind the Balaclavas of south-east Mexico* is without doubt the most hostile reaction to the Indigenous uprising in Chiapas. Reacting against the romanticisation of the Zapatistas, they wish to assert the proletarian aspects of the struggle over the more important peasant and Indigenous aspects which we have already examined. They perceive in the rebellion and the forms it has taken nothing more than one further example of deadening Leninism grafting its structures onto autonomous class struggle. Oscillating between contempt for the Indigenous' traditional subservience and an ungrounded belief in their immanent ability to launch into an unmediated orbit of pure revolution, Deneuve and Reeve give a schematic account of how they believe the class struggle in Chiapas has developed and been derailed. For them, the strong base assemblies of the Zapatista municipalities merely serve to protect those leaders who 'must never be seen': 'the Zapatista army is...only one part of The Organisation – it is its visible part.'

They account for the lack of an obvious Party line and the absence of Marxist vocabulary in general by arguing that, since the collapse of the state capitalist bloc, vanguardist organisations have had to revise their expectations downwards – implying that the forms of Leninism are intact, hidden, waiting for the historic moment. But the problem Deneuve and Reeve have is that they are simply in possession of insufficient information on which to base their analysis. *Behind the Balaclavas* consequently talks a great deal about the organisation of politics, or the politics of organisation, and very little about actual situations in Chiapas. They themselves admit they have found it difficult to get concrete information.

As a result, we find just about every aspect of the Indigenous' struggle misrepresented: the land occupations are not about land, only revenge; the womens' struggle is sidelined into the army and has no other expression; the FZLN dominates civil society outside Chiapas; the EZLN is made up of 'young people, marginal, modern, multilingual...their profile has little to do with the isolated Indian that some imagine.' And so on and so forth. Deneuve and Reeve's class analysis is inadequate, and they supplement it with a sketch of the manner in which Leninism has in the past manipulated peasant movements. It is really this refusal to even look for anything new in this struggle that is the most infuriating aspect of *Behind*

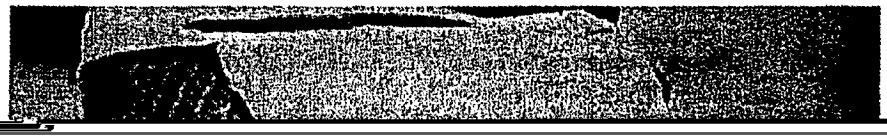
practice at appearing to be masters of their own fate while having huge sectio their economy subordinated to the interests of American capital.

The second contradiction was more serious. By so dramatically reducing size of the state sector, the party-state inevitably curtailed its own ability dispense patronage and do favours.[12] The question for the PRI became: h successful could it be at maintaining its traditional network of influence a power, a network born out of a corrupt and state-led economy, in the face of t new competitiveness the free market demanded. With the PRI unable to solve thi problem, a problem which undermined their own social base, Mexico could ope up to all sorts of possibilities.

Part 3: A Commune In Chiapas?

Traditional accumulation and social structure

With its mountainous highlands and jungles, Chiapas can feel more a part of Central America than Mexico. The Distrito Federal of Mexico City, even San Cristobal, can seem a million miles away: unconnected and unimportant. Until the 1970s capital accumulation followed a stable and relatively backward model, necessitated by the geographical inaccessibility and remoteness of this state, and made viable by the rich lands. The Revolution barely reached Chiapas, and the *latifundias* were never broken up, although an echo can be heard in the contemporaneous slave revolts in the logging camps of the Lacandon.[13] Similarly the Cardenas reforms had little effect in the 1930s. Some land was redistributed, but it was all of poor quality, 'so steep the campesinos had to tie themselves to trees to plough, while the *rancheros* continued to hold great swathes in the rolling valleys.'[14]



The pattern of accumulation was, and to a large extent still is, based on expansive land holdings rather than developing the forces of production per se. Coffee, bananas and other tropical fruit are grown for export; cattle-raising is another source of profit for the rural Chiapan bourgeoisie. Crop-growing requires only seasonal labour-power, and cattle-rearing generally requires very little at all. Accumulation in these dominant industries has come not from improving productivity (though agricultural techniques have obviously improved over the years), rather it has come from extending the land available on which to grow or graze cattle. Chiapan landowners have, as a result, a reputation for being among the most violent in Mexico. Their business has literally been that of forcing people off fertile land. Because the landowners are *mestizo* (mixed blood) or *ladino* and those they are expropriating are invariably Indigenous, the rural bourgeoisie are deeply racist – an important point to bear in mind when discussing the validity of some Zapatista ideas. Through this violent racism, the *hacendados* and *latifundistas* have been able to utterly dominate those Indigenous that have been allowed to remain as wage labourers or debt-peons. Whether this is by forcing employees to buy from the *hacienda* shop, raping their wives or daughters, or executing natives who try to organise, racism has buttressed the power of the landowner and served to nail the price of labour-power to the floor: it has greased the circuits of accumulation for decades. Backward Chiapan capital does not even have to worry

enables small private farmers and those with communal landholdings (though the difference is not always clear cut: one can merge into the other at different times of the year or at times of family change) to live happily together in revolt – the Ayala Plan is a case in point. The principal point of attack which the orthodoxy identifies is often the most resistant to change.

What, then, is the nature of the class position of the Zapatista Indian today? We described earlier the uneven development of capitalism in Chiapas. The Indians have experience of wage-labour that might include: working on ranches, seasonal work on a finca (where an employer's shop system might operate, or debt-peonage be dominant), or fully-integrated wage-labour on dam construction, or at the oil operations of the north-east. All this work is either seasonal or temporary – when it is over the campesino must return to the village to scratch out a living from the soil. For men, just about the only form of permanent work is being employed by the repressive arms of the PRI or the landowners. For the women, handicrafts (including Zapatista dolls) to sell in the markets of San Cristobal or outside Mayan ruins is a possible form of income. This is a strictly peasant activity: their stall is a patch of ground and the level of poverty offsets any petty-bourgeois trade content this activity might contain. Overall the Indian women have never been integrated into the wage-labour system, though they may have some contact with the commodity economy,

The class position of the Zapatista Indian

The class position of the Zapatista Indian is, as we shall argue, more peasant than proletarian. Before substantiating this point, we must step back briefly and derive an understanding of the nature and function of the peasantry. Traditional Marxism explains the peasantry with the same analytical tools it uses to explain class polarisation in urban societies. It is perfectly suited to the rapid movement and social change that takes place in cities during industrialisation, but it can lead some to a simplistic idea of class relations in the countryside, where many pre-capitalist forms survive and where stability rather than change can be the defining ethos. Just as capitalism in the cities bases itself on constantly revolutionising the means of production, some orthodox Marxists see in the countryside a mirrored process whereby greater numbers of peasants are excluded from the land, while a much smaller number manage to transform themselves into professional farmers with larger landholdings. With this programmatic approach it is easy to believe in the possibility of stirring up class war within the village itself. Thus for Lenin it was simply a matter of encouraging the poor peasants to rebel against the rich peasants. These poor peasants, increasingly separated from the means of production, would discover their natural allies in the proletariat, while the affluent peasants with access to land and market networks would side with the bourgeoisie. The urban formula of class struggle was simply transposed onto the countryside.

There is, of course, truth in this analysis. Capitalism, to the extent to which it can penetrate, and thereby alter, traditional peasant society, does create class polarisation. But the Soviet experience of War Communism, the New Economic Policy and particularly collectivisation, shows not an increasingly class-ridden and socially volatile peasant community; instead it shows the high level of internal stability and resistance to outside influence: not so much an example of poor peasant and political commissar vs. rich peasant, as rich and poor peasant vs. political commissar.

The problem with the orthodoxy is that it overestimates the ability of capital to break down traditional peasant structures. The process of agricultural revolution may have happened in western Europe and North America, but in many parts of the world, such as Mexico, the peasant village has remained stubbornly impervious to capitalist development. So while agribusiness is characterised by wage-labour and new farming techniques, peasant production has at its heart unspecialised production for consumption, family labour, an absence of accounting, etc. In place of the relentless drive for profit, peasant life is one of isolation and immutability where births, marriages and the seasons hold more importance than crop yield or rational business planning.

The political implications of this conservative stability are twofold. The first is that peasant uprisings are almost always a reaction to an external crisis which threatens the peace of the village, rather than as a result of internal class antagonisms. The many crises in the history of the Mexican campesino has meant this class has been an especially combative one: the sudden arrival of primitive accumulation (the Conquest), the genocide by sword and disease, the rule from Spain, the violent expansion of the latifundias under the Porfiriato are all examples. The second implication is that within the peasant uprising the binding aspect of tradition

1970s – eviction and resistance in the Lacandon

By the early '70s, with the migration to the Lacandon unstemmed and living conditions becoming unbearable, revolt was in the air. In 1972 President Echeverria sought to ease the pressure cooker by officially redistributing land, believing this would also create a new class of Indian latifundistas. 645,000 hectares were to be given to sixty-six Indian heads-of-family;[15] the rest ordered to leave. There was immediate resistance to the evictions – and an influx of young activists into the region, Los Altos in particular. Many were students who had turned to Guevarist or Maoist ideology after their exile from Mexico City in 1968, now espousing an all-out guerilla war for which they were little prepared. An example was the Maoist group *Linea Proletaria* who sent brigades from Torreon and Monterrey after being invited to Chiapas by local liberation theology priests such as Bishop Samuel Ruiz.

With this mish-mash of Leninist activity, it is difficult to discover the autonomous content of the struggle against eviction from the Lacandon.[16] To muddy the water still further, it is plain that the vanguardists and the liberation theologists were not in competition for the hearts and minds of the campesinos, as some have suggested. Liberation theology, which we shall look at in more detail below, had a high Marxist component in the mid-1970s: some priests refused sacraments to those who opposed *Linea Proletaria*; in turn the Maoists raised the banner of the Indigenous church. Consequently the self-activity of the campesinos had to pass through two layers of mediation, or one of highly-integrated opposites, before it could assert itself in any way.

The land pressure was increased yet further in 1978 when Lopez Portillo announced the creation of the Montes Azul Biosphere – 38,000 hectares in the heart of the Lacandon. Forty communities and ejidos were removed from this UN-protected ecosystem. The frequent land occupations by campesino groups, sometimes led by the CIOAC (Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Campesinos, Communist Party dominated and still influential today), were usually met with military expulsion. In 1980 the army massacred fifty Tojolabal Indians who had occupied a finca (large farm) forty miles from Comitan. This was the pattern for the '80s: the army and the police combining with the *Guardias Blancas* to suppress land takeovers and murder peasant leaders.

New patterns of accumulation

If the 1970s saw an upsurge in class struggle, it also saw the arrival of new national and international patterns of accumulation. The farmers and ranchers nowadays sit more or less uncomfortably with the new industries that wish to exploit Chiapas's abundant natural wealth, and which are often diametrically opposed to their interests. New dams were built in this period to provide electricity for petrochemical plants in Tabasco and Veracruz: Chiapas is Mexico's largest producer of hydroelectricity, though half of its homes have no power. Dam construction has provided sporadic employment for some parts of the Indigenous population, while others have had to abandon their villages to rising flood waters. Further dam construction is planned, much of it targeted at the Zapatista stronghold of Las Canadas (the Canyons), a region of Los Altos.

The importance of hydroelectricity pales in comparison with the discovery of oil, however. The deposits in the north-east of the state are part of the Gulf of Mexico field that produces 81% of Mexico's crude export. But new deposits have also been found in the east, just north of the Guatemalan border (the so-called Ocosingo field), bang in the middle of Zapatista territory. Most of this new oil is not yet being pumped, but exploratory wells have been drilled both by PEMEX, the national oil company, and international oil interests. This sort of hit-and-miss drilling requires a lot of land; consequently the *latifundistas* and *rancheros* come into conflict with the international capital that views them as backward. A less developed industry but potentially of great importance to the region is

from Ocosingo or Altamirano can be imprisoned for a night or so. The ban, developed from the immediate concerns of the women, also forced the men into a new respect which in turn opened the way for further self-defined projects – for example organising women's marches against state militarisation in the tourist town of San Cristobal.

The women's situation is not developing all one way. Pregnant *combatientes* must return to their villages where they may be subject to isolation, although the father of the child must accompany her; those who have never left will almost always be illiterate, unable to speak any Spanish, and continue to bear the burden of childcare. In many villages women are still excluded from meetings. Nevertheless the tendency is towards free determination as part of the developing social whole

Any description of Zapatista organisation must include an account

A Commune In Chiapas?

Previously sacred truths were being questioned by the PRI: the amended Article now permitted the sale of communal lands to anyone who wanted to buy from

As we have already explained, one mediation the campesinos have gone through (and still go through) enroute to becoming Zapatistas, is the influence of the Catholic church and liberation theology in particular. Whether critical or celebratory, accounts of the Zapatistas have generally neglected this reactionary influence on the development of the class struggle in Chiapas. The extent to which the autonomous communities are infected with religious sentiment is not always appreciated. Every village has a church, usually the most skilfully constructed building in the community, and which is sometimes the only place for miles that has electricity, while the Zapatistas themselves invariably live in ill-lit shacks. There is a high interpenetration of religion and politics: the lay catechist who preaches is often the local EZLN rep, and Masses have a tendency to dissolve into long political meetings – or the other way around. It would be fair to say that while liberation theology has contributed to the combativity of the Chiapan Indigenous it has also played its part in retarding the theoretical efforts of the Zapatista struggle.

The phenomenon has been present in Chiapas in a concentrated form since at least 1974, when Samuel Ruiz (the 'Red Bishop', a figure much hated by the *latifundistas* and *rancheros*) organised a 'Congress of Indian Peoples' in San Cristobal. Shocked into action by the anger displayed at the Congress, Ruiz not only stepped up the church's militant crusading in the villages, he also, as we have seen, invited Maoist cadre into the area. The mid- to late-1970s witnessed a period of co-operation between the party of the church and the church of the party. In fact the 1970s saw the highpoint of Catholicism's flirtation with Marxism. Confronted with military dictatorships across almost the whole of Latin America, many Catholics believed, for example that: 'The class struggle is a fact and neutrality in the question is not possible' or 'To participate in the class struggle...leads to a classless society without owners or dispossessed, without oppressor and oppressed.'[21] Liberation theology even had its own Che – the body of Camillo Torres, Colombian priest-turned-guerilla fighter.

The contradictions abound: believing in a classless society, catechists are unable to break with a church whose very essence is hierarchy and authority. (In its turn Rome is keen to keep them on side – in an excommunicated liberation theology it perceives the possibility of its own dissolution.) By continually encouraging the revolt of 'the poor' in the city and the country, yet unable to break through the miasma of Catholicism, the liberation theologists actively impede the development of the conscious category of proletariat, whose realisation and self-abolition is the only real solution to the impoverishment of their flock.

health clinic with Che & Zapata mural

One further aspect that differentiates the EZ from an army of the state, aside from its relatively informal command structure, is the apparent absence of both punishment and insubordination. Joining up is not compulsory, though all seventeen year-old men and women are encouraged to participate. Many seem to want to join the militias earlier. The Zapatista army has after all come ultimately from the material needs and insurrectionary desire of the Chiapan Indigenous. As such becoming a combatiente is seen to be not only in an Indian's self interest, it is also an escape from agricultural drudgery and early marriage into a world of excitement and possibility. The EZ may not appear as a burden to the young, rather to join it could be to embark upon a process of individual and communal self-expression. If we wish to believe Marcos, and some may not, it is also a space for limited, but hitherto unthinkable, sexual experimentation, free from the judgmental gaze of the village elders.

The relationship of the EZLN to the autonomous communities after 1994 appears to be characterised by the slogans: 'Commanding obeying' and 'Everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves'. The former is really nothing more than an Indigenous take on the practice of recallable delegates. As such it follows firmly in the traditions of soviets and workers' councils – though of course it is double-edged: if the commanders obey, they also command. The latter slogan is an assurance that that the EZLN, or the CCRI-GC, will not enrich itself at the expense of the communities, nor will it transform itself into a new layer of *caciquismo*. The villages are not the bases of support for the guerrilla army, as was the case in neighbouring Guatemala, rather the EZLN appears to be the base of support for the self-organised village. Because there are not nearly enough resources to go around, any material enrichment on the part of the EZ, or sections of the EZ, would instantly raise suspicions of PRI influence. But in fact the Zapatista army is not saying 'we will take only that share to which we are entitled', they are saying 'we will take less than our share.' In impoverished eastern Chiapas this amounts to a little more than posturing. The same obsession with death we noted earlier also leads into a language of sacrifice.

The dialectic of 'commanding obeying' can best be seen at work in the devising and implementation of the various Revolutionary Laws of the EZLN. The Laws themselves are mired in leftist bourgeois language – 'The Rights and Obligations of the Peoples in Struggle', 'The Rights and Obligations of the Revolutionary Armed Forces' – and often in reformist content, such as the Revolutionary Agrarian Law, which we shall look at later. Once again we see the influence of the structures of Marxism-Leninism. But they represent also a sophisticated attempt by the campesinos to begin solving their own problems. The army, being everywhere, was the only body that could implement their new world with any degree of consistency.[24] The Laws, devised after endless debate and discussion, in themselves (i.e. aside from their content) are an attempt by the Indigenous to endow their struggle with a sense of permanence, a way of saying 'we are not going back.' Naturally they are mediations, but they are at least mediations which have enabled the Zapatista struggle to move beyond visceral class antagonism into self-organisation – a coherence not seen in the Mexican countryside since the days of the Ayala Plan.

Zapatista Organisation

The scale of the uprising is the first thing that strikes the visitor to eastern Chiapas. There are over 1,100 rebel communities, each with 300-400 people, usually young. These villages, some of which have been built since 1994, are federated into thirty-two autonomous municipalities. The civil decision-making process is fluid: local decisions are made locally, important policy or project decisions made on a wider, but not always municipal, level. Municipally, delegates from each village come together in the assembly halls that are almost as common as churches. These meetings are extremely long-winded by European standards, sometimes going on for two or three days until something like consensus is reached. This ability to reach consensus is aided by the vitality of the traditional decision-making process and which recognises the pressing demands of life under siege. The remoteness of the Indians lives from regular wage labour, and the communal nature of farming which in any case is labour-intensive only seasonally, enables the Zapatistas to carve out large portions of time for meetings and organising.

The civil level is completed by the five Aguascalientes which are dotted around Zapatista territory. Named after the original Aguascalientes (where the CND was

By the mid-1980s, with swathes of Latin America undergoing a transition to democracy, notably in Brazil, the highpoint of radical liberation theology was over. The Sandinista defeat in 1990 and the end of the civil war in El Salvador further moderated the influence of Marxism. In Chiapas, however, with the situation in the highlands deteriorating, the liberation theologists wielded greater infuence than ever before. As Jacques Camatte says, 'Religion allows a human demonstration against capital because God is a human product (i.e. something that appears to exist outside the prevailing mode of production). Thanks to him, man can still save his being from the evil embrace of capital.' [22] When Marcos says 'We want liberation – but not the theology', we should not be fooled. The Zapatistas are as devout a lot as one is ever likely to meet.

However, it was not just that the Church was acting as a political force – it was also acting as a conduit for Mexican leftists who could not otherwise gain access to the Indigenous of Chiapas. Ruiz found these leftists useful in the organising

implies. The PRI web is torn but far from brushed away: the fear of informers means that on the margins of EZLN territory, clandestinity is still very much the name of the game. The expulsion where possible of PRIistas opened up a space for the Zapatistas, a space where a process of rebuilding could begin. Simultaneous to the clandestine reconstitution of the villages the insurgent army began to coalesce in the highlands around 1992-93.

Until September 1993, Marcos and the Indian cadres were following orders from the High Command of the FLN in Mexico City, though he has since made every effort to hide it. In that month, realizing the FLN units in other Mexican states were barely existent, let alone able to lead an armed revolution, he refused their request to send finances out of Chiapas. It seems to be at this time that the ideological break with the FLN occurred, though it was not fully confirmed until the failure of the January 1994 uprising. The Clandestine Committee for Indigenous Revolution (CCRI) which had been created in January 1993 and which was made up of veteran Indian cadre now pushed for war. However, on this one crucial point, the village assemblies found consensus impossible. According to Womack: '[The] assemblies groaned for consensus for the armed way, but it would not come... In the Zapatista canyons the majority ruled...where communities voted for war, the EZLN tolerated no dissent or pacifism: the minorities had to leave.' [23]

From its FLN origins, then, we know that the army itself could be a sufficient form for the hierarchical organisation of the struggle. A political cadre could